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The Chinese Film Industry: emerging debates

Leung Wing-Fai and Sangjoon Lee

China's film industry is a significant global, regional and national concern today. In 2018, China's box office increased by 9% to USD 8.9 billion in receipts—second only to North America's USD 11.38 billion.¹ Unlike Hollywood, which cannot rely only on the American film-going public, the Chinese film market excels in serving the domestic audiences. Chinese and Hollywood movies have shared the top ten box office successes equally in 2018, but domestic releases (*Operation Red Sea*, *Detective Chinatown 2*, *Dying to Survive*, *Hello Mr. Billionaire*) occupied the first four spots. In the Asian region, China has the ambition to follow the example of film industries, including Hong Kong, Japan and South Korea, that have effectively exported to audiences beyond their territories. In China's case, film producers and makers from 'Greater China' (mostly Hong Kong and Taiwan) and South Korea are also eager to collaborate, many of whom have migrated to work in the growing film sector on the mainland. Nonetheless, Chinese films continue to struggle to achieve commercial success abroad. Meanwhile, independent productions are circulated through film festivals, but recent official policy changes have increased the regulation of filmmakers working outside of the major studios. Chinese private companies have been the winners of the rapidly expanding sector. A notable example is Wanda, which has in a few short years diversified its business to become the highest-earning film company in the world after acquiring the American AMC theatre chain, Legendary Pictures, UK's Odeon and UCI cinemas and Australian cinema chain Hoyts.

¹ <https://www.screendaily.com/news/chinas-box-office-increases-by-9-to-89bn-in-2018/5135508.article>; <https://variety.com/2018/film/news/domestic-box-office-record-2018-1203095448/>. Accessed 13 May 2019.

In the English-language academic circle, likewise, the Chinese film industry study as a serious research subject has seen marked growth. There have been academic discourses about Chinese films and film festivals (Berry and Robinson 2017) and the development of the film industry (Kokas 2017, Su 2016). Still, there is a relative paucity of academic endeavour to examine the ever-thriving Chinese film market's economic, political and artistic impact within China, the Asian region and further afield. It is no doubt difficult to update research at a pace to keep up with the emerging plethora of related issues, to name but a few, China's protective regulations and censorship, intellectual property and piracy, blossoming mainstream and independent film cultures, co-productions, the effects of digitalization and how Chinese money and moviegoers reshape Hollywood (or vice versa).

The articles selected for this special issue come from a momentous gathering of scholars and industry players at *Chinese Film Market and Asian Cinema*, a Nanyang Technological University and King's College London joint conference, in 2017 in Singapore. The three-day event provided an arena for the understanding of the transformations of the regional film industry practices (production, distribution, marketing, exhibition) and film reception, juxtaposed against and in response to the Chinese film market's quantum leap. Academic experts from Asia-Pacific, the UK, and North America presented their new research findings and new development in the methodological approach in five panels. In tandem with the academic presentations, a significant number of key industry professionals—filmmakers, producers, studio executives, and journalists in South Korea, Taiwan, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, and North America participated in industry panels, making this conference more contemporaneous, impactful, and accessible for local industry specialists, film and media scholars, graduate students, cinephiles, and the general audience.

The articles in this collection represent four areas of research, which we hope allow us to define and open up the field of Chinese film industry study. In their own ways, these perspectives also challenge some preconceived ideas about transnational cinema, film culture and the role the commercial film industry plays in a digital world. Let us introduce these approaches as possible ways to examine our subject matter and to develop future academic dialogues. The transnational flow of Chinese cinema has been an important avenue for China to present itself in the world. Despite recent studies of Chinese film as transnational cinema (Higbee and Lim 2010, Hunt and Leung 2008, Lu 2001), the import and export of films have been a significant political and soft power tool throughout the twentieth century. The archival research of film collaboration from the perspectives of political alliances and cultural and social exchanges is vital and remains rare among film scholars notwithstanding several historical analyses (see, for example, Lee 2017). Wesley Jacks' in-depth study of Sino-Japanese film collaboration in the early reform era is an insightful discussion of the importance of cinema as the Chinese economy emerged out of isolation, effectively acting as a bridge between the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the gradual development of a market-conscious sector.

This leads us to consider the current interest in China's global image and its continuous attempt to enter the international film market. Aynne Kokas builds on her earlier work (2017) to discuss the Sino-American co-production *The Great Wall* (Zhang Yimou 2016), a big budget, multi-starrer which received lacklustre responses in the West and in China. Through an examination of the financing, talent and genre of the film, the author seeks to explain the challenges facing the Chinese film industry's ambition to play a central role in the Hollywood-dominated global film sector. It is also worth bearing in mind that few industries or films have achieved the kind of international success that a film such as *The Great Wall* aspires to, especially given its language barrier and unfamiliar setting and cultural

background. This study therefore sheds light on the ever-present cultural domination of Hollywood despite China's threat to overtake the American industry as the top film market.

Academic research of the film industry tends to focus on commercial releases and associated economic activities. The independent sector and art cinema are often forgotten even though they remain an important part of the film industry. The recent interest in film festivals (Berry and Robinson 2017), both mainstream and alternative, redresses the previous dearth of study of this facet of the film industry. Not only are festivals vital for the reputation, sales, transnational circulation and the funding of the film trade, they are also politically significant. The political dimension of film festivals and awards in China has been in fact embedded since the advent of these events. Seio Nakajima's panoramic analysis of the film festival and film award landscape allows us to consider the cultural and political significance of cinema that exists beyond the exhibition and circulation of commercial films.

Our final point relates to how studies of the Chinese film industry contribute to our understanding of global film and media. After all, if, like the China Model, the country's film industry has developed in a unique way, then we can only view it as a case study with limited relevance. Michael Keane's article in this special issue demonstrates otherwise. As the Chinese film industry rapidly developed through the last few decades, it has become the epicentre of the convergence of digital media and culture in the country. Film is no longer a sector distinct from television, social media and mobile technology, evidenced by the investment and business interest of the tech giants BAT (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent). While Keane remains sceptical of the exportability and soft power of Chinese film and television, the integration of traditional film and media and digital platforms in China is one to watch, and if we may be so bold to suggest one of the pioneering industries in this kind of development. Its massive, youthful market is enough to withhold the expansion of powerful global conglomerates such as Netflix (see Kokas 2018).

As a latecomer to commercial film, the People's Republic has spearheaded its growth faster than the more established industries. In spite of some major obstacles and challenges, most notably censorship and its lack of international competitiveness, the Chinese film industry allows film scholars to rethink the ever-important nexus of state, industry, texts and audiences. While organizing the 2017 conference, our aim was to encourage research and current debates of 'Chinese cinema'. The papers contained in this special issues have marked the legacy of our endeavour and opened up the academic field of Chinese film industry research.

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